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Op Ed — Another Humble Opinion

Response to Rick Anderson's IMHBCO (In My Humble But Correct Opinion) Reference Services, Scalability, and the Starfish Problem

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Returning to campus from a meeting 90 miles away, I entered my library one mid-afternoon with only one hour before another meeting on campus. Meeting days are hectic and I usually try to get to my office to deal with email and other messages that have accumulated. When I reached the top of the stairs on the second floor I saw a student looking intently at our poster of the LC Class Headings. I fought the urge to keep going toward my office and asked if she needed help. She said she was looking for books on World War II. After a bit more conversation, the two of us headed for a computer workstation to look for books on the use of codes and ciphers in WWII. It took us both a few minutes to find something useful and then we hit the Subject Heading "cryptology." We talked for a few more minutes about where else to look. In response to my last question the student told me that she knew how to find books on the shelf and was looking at the LC Call Class Headings because she had learned them in a class.

I think I probably went on to my office feeling as good as **Rick Anderson** did after helping the student he ran into (and probably accomplished more than either meeting I attended!). The difference is that I am convinced that these types of interactions, and the ones that do continue to happen at the reference desk, remain vital ways for us to connect to our primary users, the students.

Given the complex ways that the work of traditional reference librarians is changing, it is easy to argue that several hours spent at the reference desk may not be the most productive use of time. I work one three-hour shift each week at our reference desk. Some weeks are very busy with lots of interesting questions, only some of which are simple directional questions. Some weeks are slow, or filled with questions about why the printer won't work, or where the photocopier is. But even those questions are useful. Why can't students find the photocopiers (maybe we have a signage problem)? Do we need some additional training to help respond to questions connected to our technology, or perhaps try to jump start that initiative to incorporate some IT Help Desk staff at the Reference Desk?

I'll admit that I look at the activity in my library as both the library director and as a still active reference/instruction librarian. I see and hear all kinds of things while at the reference desk that I would not if I were in my office, in a class, or at yet another meeting. I see a lot of other faculty members who come into the library. Many stop to chat, or ask a question that they might not have bothered with otherwise.

We are all trying to make sense of the decrease in reference statistics — those tick marks that don't distinguish between helping a student find a book in the stacks and working with a student for 30 minutes as they begin to think through a project and learn why the books on codes in World War II might be in the section on military history, not general history. Do we need to think about how to provide help when and where students need it? Of course. Is the reference desk the most efficient way to provide that help? Probably not. Are creating better catalogs and embracing federated searching (overrated in my opinion) the answers? Maybe. Improving the tools we all use is critical. But the human-computer interface is not a substitute for what the librarian at the reference desk can do.

Student athletes see our librarian who is a regular noon basketball player and stop to say hello. Students bring beginnings of papers and ask us to read them (we do, and also encourage them to stop by the Writing Center). I hear how many cell phones seem to have been left in knapsacks. The student tour guide is relieved to see a librarian at the reference desk and asks if she wouldn't mind talking to the visiting group of prospective students and their parents.

The "less expert personnel" that **Anderson** refers to (presumably these are the nonlibrarian professionals) are providing critical services including processing ILL requests, patiently helping a student with billing problems, and

processing serials. We don't have a lot of extra staff without much to do hanging around my library. In fact, if they are at the reference desk a lot of critical work won't get done.

And, if you want to know the truth, I am not sure that an extra hour spent somewhere else on campus, consulting with a professor, or in a class is necessarily a better use of that hour. It might be. On those slow days when I am able to read a journal or look through faculty book requests I wonder if I'd be better off in my office working on a report that is due. But the slow days also allow me to look around, to see the library, to see my co-workers, and to see the ways students are using those tools we'd like to fix.

Making the library easier to use isn't just about fixing the technology. It's about seeing how and where students want to work, providing clear and helpful signage, and making finding help when it's needed easy. That said, I am not sure **Anderson** is wrong about where the reference desk is headed — interesting and innovative changes are already being made by many libraries. But reference librarians aren't the egotists that **Anderson** makes them out to be. It's not simply about feeling good when we can answer a question. It's about what we learn from every interaction with a student. It's about the student who comes back weeks later to tell you how they are progressing on a project you helped them with. Or the faculty member who stops to talk about a class as you are checking out a book to them (yes, at my small library reference librarians help out at the circulation desk when things get busy).

So, for now, we will continue to staff our reference desk with librarians. Perhaps the return on investment isn't ideal, but, as the person responsible for the starfish at my college, everyone we help is worth it. 🐟

